*Freemuse submission: Cultural rights and public spaces*

**Background**

In 2018, Freemuse published the report *Creativity Wronged: How Women’s Right to Artistic Freedom is Denied and Marginalised*; a report which explores women’s right to freedom of artistic and creative expression globally, and instances where this is affected. From this research, a growing trend emerged which showed the enormity of abuses against female artists both online and off. A preliminary assessment has been formulated which will be published early June. This assessment explores the ways in which female artists have had their access to public spaces online, that is, the express their art fully publicly, inhibited in various ways. The following explores key cases from this report that exemplify this loss of access.

**Scope**

The extension of the definition of a ‘public spaces’ is of note; it is necessary to exemplify that in the digital age, public space is no longer limited to strictly physical spaces.

For this purpose of this response, Freemuse defines the scope of ‘public space’ as that which is inhabited both physically and virtually, with an emphasis on the virtual given its current state of social and legal indeterminateness.

**Introduction**

*Women artists suffer being silenced not only by governments and religious structures, but also by social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. These companies increasingly remove content they deem indecent or by request from authorities. Threats through social media on women artists are also on the rise.*

* Creativity Wronged: How Women’s Right to Artistic Freedom is Denied and Marginalised

The advent of the Internet and its exorbitant growth, means that some 56% of the world’s population has access online[[1]](#endnote-1). This inhabitancy has extended the realm of public space into the digital. Whilst this has led to a democratisation of art in many ways, with the removal of many traditional cultural gatekeepers, it also has inhibiting factors, including threats of violence and censorship. The following will focus on these two areas as key factors which limit women access to public space as it relates to expressing themselves artistically.

**Factor inhibiting access: threats and online abuse**

As an extension of the physical public space, women online are exposed to behaviours and violations that have been largely legislated against in the physical public spaces. In physical public spaces, street harassment is largely perpetrated by persons who deem women as entering into their domain, and as such, have autonomy to engage in interactions that are not be consented to. These behaviours are now seen as a precursor to physical and sexual violence, and perpetuating rape culture[[2]](#endnote-2).

Whilst there are certain safeguards in place for women in physical public spaces, women in digital public spaces are vulnerable due to the fact that they lack protection structures that will help them face these misogynistic attitudes.

Women and women-related artwork in digital spaces are exposed to an alarming number of death and rape threats, censorship, as well as legal action taken against them, due to the fact that they are considered to be behaving in an indecent and non-feminine way.

One such case exemplifying this features that of Kyrgyz singer Zere Asylbek. After releasing the music video for her first song Kyz (English for “Girl”), Asylbek received numerous death threats online. Notably, the negative and abusive response was in large part due to the fact that Asylbek wore a visible bra in the video, and that other women in the clip had dyed hair and wore earrings. The content of the song also included the line “Don’t tell me what to wear, don’t tell me how to behave”[[3]](#endnote-3).

Another case, in the USA and online, Chvrches singer Lauren Mayberry faced a barrage of online abuse for criticisms she made regarding fellow singer Chris Brown. The online abuse depicted acts of an extremely violent, graphic and sexual nature, including rape and murder. As a result, the band have added police presence to their shows[[4]](#endnote-4).

In both of these cases, the perpetuators of the online abuse have faced no legal ramifications. The space for women online is fraught with danger of threat and abuse, and given the large gap between technological advancement and legislative processes, protections are largely lacking when it comes to women inhabiting public space and freedoms online.

**Factor inhibiting access: privatisation and its impact**

The censoring of art, particularly depicting the female body, has been largely impacted by the privatization of online spaces through social media. Freemuse research demonstrates this growing trend.

In one recent case, a 30,000-year-old statuette depicting a naked woman was removed from Facebook after being labelled as “dangerously pornographic”. An image of the famous Paleolithic *Venus of Willendorf* posted on Facebook in December 2017 by Laura Ghianda, a self-described “artivist”, was removed as inappropriate content despite four attempts to appeal the decision. It took until 1 March for the company to apologise for the mistake[[5]](#endnote-5).

Social media giants still maintain a position where female body nudity is forbidden – even a woman’s nipple is reason enough to censor artwork, even when their male counterparts are allowed to display theirs. This has inspired the online movement #FreeTheNipple, aimed at normalising the depiction of the female body in online spaces.

The privatisation of the digital space, whilst offering to impose so-called “community standards” supposedly to protect those online, also offers to inhibit their freedoms. And whilst we continue to see an imbalance between what is appropriate between male and female bodies, we will continue to see the suppression of women in the public digital space.

**Finding**

Whilst seemingly two disjointed issues, factors of online abuse and social media censorship centre on one core issue: the policing of women (and in this scope, women or women-centred artists) and their bodies.

The advent and large-scale uptake of digital and online technologies and social media add to the complexity of the already complex issue of women’s ability to express themselves and their bodies through art.

Whilst solutions may be part social or judicial (or any combination of both), Freemuse will continue to report, research and advocate for the freedoms of artistic expression in public spaces–in all of its evolutions and expanses.

1. Internet World Stats, 18 May 2019, https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm (accessed 20 May 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Kearl, Holly, 2010, ‘Stop Street Harassment: Making Public Places Safe and Welcoming for Women,’ Santa Barbara, California: Praeger.  [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Zere Asylbek: I am ready for threats and will not give up my work’, 24.kg News Agency, 19 September 2018, https://24.kg/english/96435\_Zere\_Asylbek\_I\_am\_ready\_for\_threats\_and\_will\_not\_give\_up\_my\_work/, (accessed 20 May 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. # ‘NEWS: CHVRCHES increase security due to threats from Chris Brown & Tyga fans!’, *Dead Press*, 2 May 2019, http://www.deadpress.co.uk/news-chvrches-increase-security-due-to-threats-from-chris-brown-tyga-fans/, (accessed 20 May 2019).

   [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. # ‘Facebook apologizes for censoring 30,000-year-old statuette depicting naked woman’, *Deutsche Welle*, 2 March 2018, https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/03/02/facebook-apologizes-censoring-30-000-year-old-statuette-depicting-naked-woman/388209002/, (accessed 20 May 2019).

   [↑](#endnote-ref-5)